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Brand New Boy

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Editor's Choice:

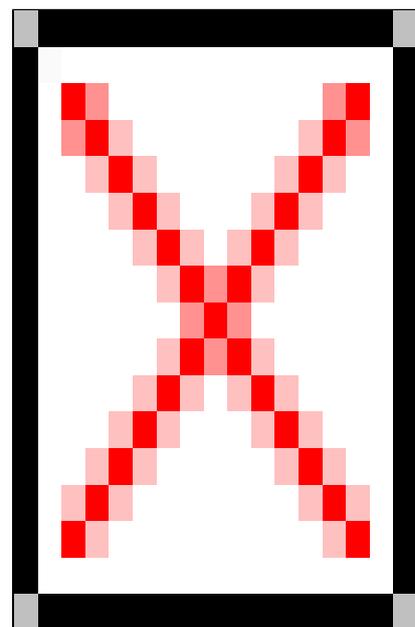
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3



This novel starts with a lively description of a primary school lesson led by a good -humoured teacher encouraging his class to respond in kind. Like the Social Services schools still too often come off badly in children's fiction, reflecting lazy stereotypes from the past rather than anything more interestingly topical, as Almond achieves here. But this bright introduction proves to be a false dawn with the entry of George, a new pupil so obviously a robot any normal child would have rumbled him in just a few minutes. Protected by two technicians in disguise with the connivance of Mrs Hoolihan, the school's rather too silly head teacher, the intention is to see how well George manages. This will be both in class and after hours going home for tea with Daniel, the story's junior narrator.

Despite largish print and Marta Altés's lively and abundant black and white illustrations, things only take on a more urgent tempo once George is finally revealed for what he is and then dismantled in front of the class to be packed away for spare parts for use in future robots. His former school friends then decide to intervene, kidnapping and then hiding him away from his handlers, desperate to get him back. Almond makes this an issue of morality, with the children insisting that George is still in a sense a child and as such worthy of protection and some sort of life. But he has such very limited responses this crusade for his rights never rings true, with genuine sentiment eventually giving way to

something closer to sentimentality. There are still some good moments as one would expect from a writer of Almond's calibre. But this is not him at his best ? laboured rather than fluent, sending out mixed messages that only become more confused as his story struggles towards its end.

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